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ABSTRACT

Results of an evaluation of a college honors program are presented. Honors students at the State University of New York at Oswego were compared to four other student samples attending the same college: (1) nonhonors students matched on sex, major, and grade point average; (2) students who had dropped out of the honors program; (3) students invited to participate in the honors program but who declined the invitation; and (4) a random sample of general students. Questionnaires and academic protocols were administered to 114 students to provide information on demographic and academic characteristics of the samples; academic motivation, intellectual/cognitive development, moral development, and personality development. Results indicated that the honors program: (1) met the academic and institutional goals set forth in its mission statement; (2) served to stimulate intrinsic versus extrinsic motivational orientations toward achievement; and (3) has fostered an environment of active searching among potential choices or commitments in the development of personal identity. The results are discussed in terms of specific program recommendations and the general need for systematic evaluation of the growing number of programs designed for college-level gifted students. (Author/SW)

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Using Developmental Indices in Evaluating an Honors College Program

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Running head: HONORS COLLEGE EVALUATION

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August 1984.

Abstract

This study reports on a comprehensive evaluation of a college honors program. Honors students were compared to four other student samples attending the same college: 1) non-honors students matched on sex, major and GPA; 2) students who had dropped out of the honors program; 3) students invited to participate in the honors program but declining; and 4) a random sample of general students. A total of 114 students participated in the study by completing questionnaires designed for the evaluation. In addition to demographic, academic and sample specific information, participants completed protocols assessing academic motivation (Helmreich & Spence, 1978); intellectual/cognitive development (Knefelkamp, 1974), moral development (Rest, 1979), and personality (identity) development (Marcia, 1966). Results indicated that the honors program: 1) has met the academic and institutional goals set forth in its mission statement; 2) has served to stimulate intrinsic versus extrinsic motivational orientations toward achievement, and 3) has fostered an environment of active searching among potential choices or commitments in the development of personal identity. Results are discussed in terms of specific program recommendations, and the general need for systematic evaluation of the growing number of programs designed for college level gifted students.

Using Developmental Indices in Evaluating an Honors College Program

Introduction

Evaluating college honors programs becomes an important task as more and more colleges and universities establish such programs to meet the needs of gifted students. Recent data suggests that over 52 percent of America's colleges and universities currently offer college wide honors programs, and, that percentage is growing (Austin, 1983). Further, shifting enrollment patterns of gifted students suggests that the 1980's will see the overwhelming majority of such students attending schools other than those considered "blue chip" or "most prestigious" institutions (Austin, 1983).

This study reports on a comprehensive evaluation of the State University of New York at Oswego's Honors College Program. The evaluation included components assessing the degree to which the honors program after four years of existence had 1) met institutional and academic goals set out in its charter; 2) influenced college wide faculty perceptions of the program; and 3) impacted on individual students' cognitive, ethical and personal development.

Three of our evaluation measures are developmental in nature. Implicit in their construction is a sensitivity to change, which is important if we are to look for both growth, and differences in that growth among our samples. Additionally, these three measures share a similar view of human development. Specifically, the theories from which these instruments derive describe human development in terms of qualitative, structural or stage-like change. This is to say that a focus of this investigation was on the underlying organization

of our students' understandings and personal growth rather than on the specific content (e.g., facts, GPA's, attitudes etc.) of their knowledge. This suggests that our measures should be sensitive to developmental differences in our samples even though they may represent groups of students of similar chronological ages.

Methods

Sample Definition

Honors sample. As of January, 1983, there were 56 students actively involved with the Honors College. Five students were eliminated from the sample because they were either involved directly with the evaluation process or were absent from Oswego because they were completing internships. Of the 51 students eligible for participation in the evaluation, data for 35 or 69% were collected.

Matched sample. Students who had never been involved with the Honors College were matched with honors students on three dimensions: 1) GPA, 2) Sex; and 3) College major. Therefore, 51 non-honors students were chosen. Of these 51, we were unable to locate six students (i.e., letters returned undeliverable, phones disconnected etc.) Therefore, for the 45 matched students, data were collected from 23 or 51% of this sample.

The drop-out sample. Students who had, at one time, been participants in the Honors College, but who chose to drop-out of the program defined this sample. A total of 51 students have dropped out of the program since it began. Twenty-seven of these students have transferred from SUNY-Oswego, leaving 24 possible respondents. Data were collected from 17 or 71% of these students.

Invited but declined sample. Students who were invited to attend the honors program but who chose to decline the invitation comprised yet another student sample. One hundred forty-two students who subsequently enrolled at SUNY-Oswego were originally recruited by the Honors College but declined their offer. Of these 142 students, 15 students in each of the four years, (i.e., freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior) were randomly chosen to participate in this evaluation study. Hence, 60 students in all were potential respondents for this sample and data were obtained from 28 or 47% of this sample.

General student sample. This sample was randomly drawn from the total pool of seniors registered at SUNY-Oswego. Of the 40 students randomly chosen we were unable to contact 3 of them, thus dropping the total sample to 37. Data were collected from 14 or 38% of this sample.

Faculty not involved in the honors program. All academic faculty (excluding those newly appointed) were sent short questionnaires designed to measure their perceptions of the Honors College. Of 313 surveys distributed 112 were returned.

Faculty involved in the honors program. A slightly more detailed survey was sent to 28 faculty who had been involved in honors course instruction. Of these, 16 returned completed surveys.

Instruments

Work and Family Orientation Questionnaire. Helmreich and Spence's (1978) Work and Family Orientation Questionnaire was employed to assess students' level of motivation. The questionnaire includes four statistically independent dimensions of motivation: Work; Mastery, Competiveness, and Personal Unconcern, and was designed to objectively evaluate motivation in a college population.

The mastery scale consists of items describing preference for difficult and challenging tasks. The work scale concerns positive attitudes toward work, and the competiveness scale contains items describing the desire to win in interpersonal situations. Personal unconcern is similar, in a theoretical way, to fear of success, where a high score indicates a lack of concern with the negative reactions to others to personal achievement.

Measure of Intellectual Development. The MID (Knefelkamp, 1974; Widick, 1975) is a paper and pencil assessment of the intellectual aspect of the Perry (1970) model (positions 1-5). Students are asked to provide open ended responses to three essays which address decision making, career choice, and classroom learning. Moore (1982) in his review of the literature reports reliability and validity informaiton which suggests the MID is both psychometrically sound and a useful measure of the Perry construct of intellectual development.

Scoring. Scoring of the MID was conducted by trained scorers at the Center for Applications of Developmental Instruction at the University of Maryland under the direction of L. Lee Knefelkamp, and William S. Moore. Scores range from 222-555, (each position value representing a score for one of the three essays), with transitional steps between the stable positions. These transitions (e.g. 223, 233) reflect dominant and subdominant positions in the development of individual's cognitive complexity with respect to knowledge and the college learning experience. The MID derived positions reflect a simple stage model interpretation of the Perry model of intellectual development.

Defining Issues Test. The DIT is an objective paper and pencil measure

of moral judgment development. Employing the short form in this study, the DIT consists of three dilemmas in which a story protagonist is faced with choosing among competing rights and claims as defined by a particular dilemma. Students are asked to rate and rank those reasons they feel are important to consider in resolving the moral dilemma. The reasons subjects are presented are representative of developmental stage responses as defined by Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The most widely used measure of moral development, the interested reader is referred to Rest (1979) for details on the reliability and validity of the instrument.

Scoring. Scoring of the DIT yields both Kohlbergian stage use percentages, and a P percent score which reflects the relative importance an individual considers principled reasons to be in resolving the specific moral dilemma under consideration. It should be noted that the P percent score is reported as being the most valid and reliable score derived from the DIT (Rest, 1979). Stage scores range from 0-100%, and P scores from 0-95%.

Identity Status Interview. The ISI (Marcia, 1966) was originally designed as an open-ended interview, the objective of which is to locate an individual in one of four identity statuses. We have modified the format providing students the opportunity to respond in written form to questions identical to those on the original interview. Questions focus on the areas of occupation and ideology (religion and politics), and are designed to assess the degree to which one is deciding upon and commiting oneself to what one is to be (occupation), as well as formulating and taking action on what one believes (ideology). Marcia (1980) reports an extensive review of the literature demonstrating the ISI to be the most widely used measure of middle and late

adolescent personality development.

Scoring. Scoring of the ISI locates an individual in one of four identity statuses: 1) Identity achievement; 2) Moratorium; 3) Foreclosure; and 4) Identity diffusion. Identity status is determined by assessing independently the presence or absence of 'crisis' and 'commitment' in the areas of occupation and ideology. In this context crisis refers to an active period of decision making, while commitment refers to unwavering decisions having already been made. Ten protocols were randomly chosen and scored by two trained raters. Interscorer reliability was found to be .82 across these protocols.

Demographic, academic and sample specific information. All student participants were asked to respond to demographic and academic (e.g. high school G.P.A., SAT scores, college major etc.) questions on a survey designed for this evaluation. Information specific to each sample (e.g. reasons for dropping out of the program for the drop-out sample) was also requested. Additionally students were asked to indicate which of over 50 cultural and intellectual college sponsored events they had attended in the previous six months. Finally, representative science and social science faculty were contacted and asked to identify public policy issues and concerns central to their own disciplines. A list of 19 such concerns was generated that ranged from 'nuclear arms' to 'supply side economics' and 'genetic engineering'. Students were asked to rate their competence to discuss each issue on a four point scale ranging from very qualified to very unqualified. Students were also asked to write short essays for a sub-sample of these issues. They were

asked to indicate the concerns they deemed important to consider when evaluating the controversial nature of these issues. The issues students were asked to respond to were: 1) nuclear arms; 2) U.S. involvement in El Salvador; 3) genetic engineering; 4) energy concerns; and 5) expenditures in education, human services and defense. Responses were rated on a scale from 1-4 (excellent-poor). Inter-rater reliability was established by having two independent raters rate all essays blind, and was found to be .88.

Results Summary and Discussion

Selected significant findings are presented below.

Motivation

The normed percentiles provided for college students and reported by Helmreich and Spence (1978) indicated that for the mastery and work scales honors students reported motivation levels higher than 90% of the norm group. Between sample comparisons indicated that honors students scored significantly higher ($p < .05$) than the general student sample on the mastery and work scales. Linear trends analyzed within each sample overtime (across freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years) indicated that for honors students, competition scale scores decreased in monotonic fashion from freshman to senior years. This is interesting in light of the finding that honors seniors obtained lower competition scores than any of the other groups, even though neither their motivation to work hard or for mastery decreased. Perhaps it is the case that by the time they are seniors, honors students realize they don't need to compete having already demonstrated personal competence, and they can focus more on mastery and excellence. Further, it may be that continued success

In the honors program takes pressure off students, allows them the "luxury" of not having to compete, affording them the opportunity to focus energies in the areas of work and mastery. This fostering of what we consider to be intrinsic over extrinsic motivation to achieve represents an exciting outcome of this evaluation and one worthy of further study.

Intellectual development (MID).

No differences were observed between Perry stage profiles of the Oswego honors sample and a sample of honors students from the University of Maryland (χ^2_6=8.64). As a group our general student sample revealed significantly ($p<.01$) less cognitive complexity with respect to decision making, career choice and classroom learning than did the honors sample. No dramatic differences with respect to intellectual/cognitive development as conceptualized by the MID and the Perry scheme emerged between the honors sample and other "cognitively matched" samples.

Moral development (DIT)

An overall correlation of .48 ($p<.01$) was obtained between MID position score and DIT 'P' score. Honors students 'P' scores were significantly ($p<.05$) higher than the general student sample. While the P scores of the general sample were in accord with the norms provided by Rest (1979) for college students, the P scores of the honors (and matched) samples were dramatically higher (mean 'P' percent honors = 52.6, sd. 18.3; mean 'P' percent matched = 66.6 sd. 17.7). Examining the percent of stage use by sample revealed a significant difference in conventional vs. principled stage usage by the general, honors and matched samples (χ^2_{16}=38.55, $p<.01$). In point of fact it

was only among the general sample that we observed predominantly conventional level (stages 3 and 4) responding. In findings somewhat consistent with the MID results, moral reasoning development exhibited not dramatic differences between the honors sample and other cognitively matched samples. At the same time, our data does indicate that our honors students are reasoning at levels considerably higher than general students at Oswego and nationwide.

Identity Status

Positive correlations (.36-.84) were obtained between moral judgment level (DIT 'P' score) and identity status, in each of our samples. A significantly higher percentage of honors students were found to be moratorium status than any of the other samples. Concurrently, there were fewer achieved status honors students than any of the other samples excluding the general sample. One interpretation of this finding may be that the honors program fosters an environment of active searching among potential choices or commitments in the areas of occupation and ideology. This interpretation receives support from other evaluation results which found significantly more changes of major among honors students as well as a better ability among this group to present competing sides of public policy issues. We believe it to be the case that the honors program may be providing an "enriched" opportunity to develop one's full potential. By avoiding the pitfall of early commitment (foreclosed status), honors students do appear to more fully explore the opportunities available to them during the college years. Undoubtedly the honors program contributes to this active exploration.

Demographic, academic and sample specific findings. Through an examination of socio-demographic characteristics, it was found that Honors College students were more likely to come from a higher socio-economic background than other students. Students were questioned about their high school experiences and expecting the general sample, all samples were found to be roughly equivalent on measures of academic achievement. Differences in college experiences between samples were revealed with respect to choice of academic major and transfer considerations. Junior and senior honors students were found to have achieved familiarity with a non-Western cultural tradition. With respect to the objective that honors students be able to participate responsibly in public policy affairs, honors students were found to be superior to all other student samples in their ability to articulate the competing sides of public policy issues. Similarly, honors students attended far more cultural events than did any of the other student samples which indexed yet a further objective, that of acquiring an appreciation for the arts. The honors program has succeeded in attracting exceptionally talented and motivated students who might otherwise attend college elsewhere since honors students cited the opportunity to participate in the Honors College as instrumental in their decision to attend college at Oswego. Honors students identified the advisement process as something which requires considered attention by program administrators in the future. Dropout students reported the perceived incompatibility of honors and academic major requirements as being the primary reason for their premature withdrawal form the program. In contrast, the invited sample indicated a concern they couldn't do honors quality work as

being responsible for their decision to originally decline the Honors College invitation. Upon reflection, this sample reported a desire to learn more about the Honors College and hence, reconsider their original decision. The evaluation results clearly indicate the majority of the Honors College objectives have been successfully achieved.

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